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ABSTRACT

This study investigated possible differences in the perceptions of three stakeholder groups (teachers, students, and parents) regarding grading and grade reporting. Data were gathered through questionnaires completed by 215 teachers in 2 states, 4,265 elementary school, middle school, and high school students, and 944 parents. Different forms were developed for the different groups, but the items were nearly identical. Teachers at the elementary level tended to believe that an ideal distribution of grades would have most students receiving the highest grades possible. The ideal distribution patterns of teachers at other levels and most students were similar, but parents had more mixed ratings, with parents of elementary school students generally perceiving that students would attain high grades, and those of older students expecting a more even distribution of grades across grade categories. Overall, as grade level progressed, teachers, parents, and students all tended to rank communicating with parents as a less important purpose of grading and providing feedback to students as a more important purpose. All groups recommended the inclusion of multiple sources of information in determining grades, but parents seemed less well informed about the evidence to be considered in determining grades. (Contains 4 tables and 13 references.) (SLD)

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Perspectives on Grading and Reporting: Differences Among Teachers, Students, and Parents

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Perspectives on Grading and Reporting:

Differences Among Teachers, Students, and Parents

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The issue of grading looms on the horizon for educators today. With student learning standards established in nearly every state and assessment procedures to measure those standards in place, elementary and secondary educators alike now face the daunting challenge of how best to grade and report student learning. Most recognize the numerous inadequacies of their current grading and reporting methods (e.g., see Austin & McCann, 1992; Brookhart, 1999; Marzano, 2000). Few, however, have found alternatives that mutually satisfy the diverse needs of various stakeholders, most importantly teachers, students, and parents.

The purpose of this study was to investigate possible differences in the perceptions of these different stakeholder groups regarding grading and reporting. Specifically, it was designed to determine similarities and differences in teachers', students', and parents' perceptions of the purposes of grading and reporting, actual and ideal distributions of grades, and the factors considered in determining grades or marks. Previous studies have explored teachers' perceptions of these issues, sometimes considering differences between teachers at the elementary and secondary levels (e.g., Brookhart, 1993, 1994; Frisbie & Waltman, 1992; McMillan, Workman, & Myran, 1999; McMillan, 2001). Other research has considered differences between teachers' and parents' interpretations of grades (Waltman & Frisbie, 1993). This study set out to extend that work by considering perceptions of the primary recipients of grading and reporting information, namely students and their parents.

Methods

Data for this study were gathered through questionnaires administered to matched groups of teachers, students, and parents. Although different questionnaire forms were developed for each group, nearly all of the items included in each of the forms were identical (see Appendix). The major differences were in the descriptive information requested at the top of each form and the form's color. Questionnaires were printed on different color paper to simplify identification.

Items included in the questionnaires were drawn mainly from the research of Brookhart (1993), Frisbie and Waltman (1992), and McMillan (2001), and were constructed in a variety of formats. Some were short-answer, constructed-response items that asked about the purposes of grading (e.g., "What do you believe are the major reasons we use report cards and assign grades to students' work?") and grade distributions (e.g., "What percent of students do you believe should receive each of the following grades in a typical class?). Others used a selected-response format (e.g., "Among the elements listed below, please estimate how important each is in determining your child's grade: **1** = Very Important, **2** = Somewhat Important, **3** = Not Important). Still others involved rank-ordering (e.g., "Based on your beliefs, please rank order the following purposes for grading from **1** [Most important] to **6** [Least important]").

All questionnaires also included a few items requesting descriptive information. For example, the teachers' questionnaire asked teachers to record the grade level and subject areas taught, along with their years of teaching experience. To simplify completion and encourage a high return rate, questionnaire items were stated simply, printed in large type, and limited in

number so that the questionnaire would consist of a single, two-sided page that required no more than about ten minutes to complete.

Data Sources

Questionnaires were administered to all regular education teachers in grades 3 through 12 in a moderate size school district in a northern state (n = 146) and to selected groups of elementary and middle school teachers in grades 3 through 8 in a large school district in a Midwest state (n=93). All teachers from the large school district were participants in an extended professional development activity that focused on the use of performance assessments. Both school districts served suburban communities with approximately 20% minority students. Most of the teachers were experienced classroom veterans, averaging approximately 11 years of teaching experience. Teachers who taught at the k-2 levels were not included because of the uniqueness of grading and reporting at these levels in both districts.

Each participating teacher was also given 30 copies of both the student and parent questionnaires. Thirty was the maximum number of students in any teacher's class. Teachers were asked to administer the student questionnaire to students in their class, but to have a student volunteer collect the completed forms in order to assure students' anonymity in their responses. In addition, teachers were asked to distribute the parent questionnaire to students to take home for their parents to complete. A brief, cover letter was provided with the parent questionnaire explaining the purpose of the study and guaranteeing anonymity in their responses. A student volunteer, too, then gathered these. Teachers who taught more than one class section were asked to administer the student questionnaire and distribute the parent questionnaire in one, randomly selected class. All forms were completed in the spring of the year, after both students and parents had ample opportunity to observe the grading and reporting practices of the teacher.

Response rates varied depending on the group. Approximately 90% of the teachers (n = 215) completed the questionnaire and provided usable responses. Returns were fairly evenly divided between elementary teachers (n = 94) and middle or high school teachers (n = 121). Teachers indicated that all students present on the day questionnaires were administered completed the student form (n = 5267) and 81% of these were usable (n = 4265). Those considered unusable were either completed inappropriately or illegible. Unfortunately, the response rate from parents was substantially less, with usable forms returned from only 18% of the parents (n = 944). Response rates of the parent questionnaires also varied greatly among teachers, with some teachers receiving more than 50% returned and others receiving less than 10%.

Analyses of the completed questionnaires for this study were based primarily on tabulations of the selected response and rank ordering items. Further work involving content analyses of the constructed response items is planned. Student and parent questionnaires were matched to each teacher to determine within and between class variations. Teacher questionnaires were also coded by school to determine within and between school variations.

Results

The selected response and rank ordering items on the questionnaires focused on three major grading issues: (1) perceptions of actual and ideal distributions of grades, (2) the purposes of grades, and (3) the sources of information used in determining students' grades.

Perceptions of Actual and Ideal Distributions of Grades

Each questionnaire included an item that asked teachers, parents, and students to estimate the percent of students in the class that receive each of five grades: A, B, C, D, and E or F. The next item asked what they would consider the ideal distribution of grades in the class among the same five grades. Results from the total group of teachers, parents, and students are shown in Table 1.

Teachers (n = 215)	**Grades**				
	A	**B**	**C**	**D**	**E or F**
Actual	32.0 (34.4)	27.0 (15.7)	23.6 (18.4)	11.2 (8.8)	6.2 (5.9)
Ideal	41.0 (34.5)	28.1 (18.9)	19.0 (21.3)	8.9 (8.1)	3.0 (4.5)

Parents (n = 944)	**Grades**				
	A	**B**	**C**	**D**	**E or F**
Actual	46.5 (29.5)	28.2 (12.7)	18.8 (15.5)	4.0 (4.7)	2.5 (4.3)
Ideal	52.7 (33.7)	25.2 (18.5)	16.9 (14.9)	3.2 (5.9)	2.0 (3.8)

Students (n = 4265)	**Grades**				
	A	**B**	**C**	**D**	**E or F**
Actual	31.0 (22.7)	32.80 (14.9)	22.6 (14.9)	8.7 (7.0)	4.7 (5.3)
Ideal	51.2 (29.7)	28.1 (17.0)	12.8 (12.0)	5.2 (6.5)	2.8 (4.4)

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations ( ) of Teachers', Parents', and Students' Estimates of the Actual and Ideal Distributions of Grades

Difference between teachers', parents', and students' responses were tested using a 3-way MANOVA model and four dependent measures (the Percent E or F was eliminated due to the ipsative nature of these ratings). These tests showed that there were no significant differences between teachers and students in their perceptions of the actual distributions of grades, but parents tended to perceive that there were a larger percent of A's. In terms of ideal grade distributions, there were no significant differences between parents and students, but teachers indicated a lower percent of A's would be ideal. Hence, it appears that parents believe that there are more A's than either teachers or students believe. On the other hand, teachers believe that ideally, there should be fewer A's than either parents or students believe.

Further correlational analyses showed, however, a strong, negative correlation between grade level and estimates of both the Actual and Ideal percent of A's. These correlations are shown in Table 2. All of the correlations are statistically significant, due mainly to the large sample sizes. These correlations show that as grade level increases, teachers, parents, and students perceive there is a smaller percent of students attaining A's. All also perceive that this is appropriate. The magnitude of these correlations for parents' ratings is significantly lower than that of teachers' ratings and of students' ratings.

	Actual Percent A's	Ideal Percent A's
Teachers	-.74	-.50
Parents	-.36	-.31
Students	-.86	-.78

Table 2. Correlation Coefficients Between Grade Level and Teachers', Parents', and Students' Estimates of the Actual and Ideal Distributions of A Grades

These results show that teachers at the elementary level generally believe an ideal distribution of grades would have most students receiving the highest grades possible (A's and B's) and few or no students receiving low or failing grades. The ideal distribution patterns of middle and high school teachers tend to be less skewed, but still included most students in the higher grade categories. Students' perceptions tend to be similar, although middle and high school students do indicate that ideally, there should be more high grades.

Parents' ratings are more mixed. Parents of elementary students generally perceive that students will attain high grades. Parents of middle and high school students, however, often indicated the ideal distribution of grades would more closely resemble a normal distribution pattern, with grades being distributed more evenly across the grade categories. Such perceptions are likely based on what most parents experienced during their school years (Guskey & Bailey, 2001). These results may be suspect, however, due to the low response rate among parents. Furthermore, no evidence is available to determine if those parents who responded to the questionnaire are systematically different from those who chose not to respond.

Ratings of the Purposes of Grading

Another item on the questionnaire asked teachers, parents, and students to rank order the six major purposes of grading identified in the research of Frisbie & Waltman (1992). These purposes include (1) To communicate the achievement status of students to parents and others; (2) To provide information students can use for self-evaluation; (3) To select, identify, or group students for certain educational paths or programs; (4) To provide incentives for students to learn; (5) To evaluate the effectiveness of instructional programs; and (6) To provide evidence of students' lack of effort or inappropriate responsibility. The average rankings of teachers, parents, and students of each of these six purposes are shown in Table 3.

Purpose	Teachers	Parents	Students
Communicate to parents	2.0 (2.3)	2.3 (1.8)	2.4 (2.1)
Feedback for students	2.6 (2.1)	2.7 (1.8)	2.5 (1.9)
Select, identify, or group	3.2 (2.7)	3.6 (1.7)	3.8 (2.0)
Provide incentives	3.8 (2.9)	3.0 (1.7)	3.3 (2.2)
Evaluate school programs	4.4 (2.8)	4.2 (2.4)	4.1 (1.9)
Lack of effort and responsibility	4.8 (2.0)	5.3 (1.6)	4.8 (1.9)

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations ( ) of Teachers', Parents', and Students' Rankings of Different Grading Purposes

As the data in the table shows, teachers, parents, and students expressed very similar rankings, although some differences are apparent. First, the responses of teachers were much more varied than those of either parents or students. And second, teachers tended to rank the incentive value of grades lower than either parents or students. Perhaps teachers' experiences with grading indicate to them that grades have little value as a motivational device.

Here, again, correlational analyses showed a strong relationship between grade level and these ranking. Overall, as grade level increased, teachers, parents, and students all tended to rank communicating with parents as a less important purpose of grading and providing feedback to students as a more important purpose. (Note: Because of the nature of the ranking scale, a higher rank is a lower number; hence, the reversed correlation coefficient signs). Oddly, as grade level increases, teachers tend to rank the selection purposes of grades as less important, but

parents and students both rank selection as increasingly important. Similarly, at higher grade levels teachers tend to rank the incentive value of grades as less important, while parents and students rank incentive value as increasingly important. And finally, both teachers and parents rank the lack of effort and responsibility as less important in higher grades, but students rank it is more important.

Purpose	Teachers	Parents	Students
Communicate to parents	.83	.35	.32
Feedback for students	-.67	-.14	-.48
Select, identify, or group	.43	-.28	-.42
Provide incentives	-.47	.54	.23
Evaluate school programs	-.49	-.62	-.18
Lack of effort and responsibility	.32	.53	-.34

Table 4: Correlation Coefficients Between Grade Level and Teachers', Parents', and Students' Rankings of the Importance of Various Purposes of Grading.

Sources of Information Used in Determining Students' Grades

Another item on the questionnaire asked teachers, parents, and students to rate the importance of various elements in determining students' grades. Each element was to be rated as **1** = Very Important; **2** = Somewhat Important; or **3** = Not Important. Average ratings of teachers, parents, and students are shown in Table 5.

Analyses of responses to this question about the performance elements that should be included in determining grades showed that all groups recommend the inclusion of multiple and highly diverse elements. This result supports the findings of Brookhart (1991), Cizek, Fitzgerald, and Rachor (1996) and Cross & Frary (1996) who found that most teachers combine numerous different elements into a single mark, yielding "hodgepodge" grade that is extremely difficult to interpret.

Generally teachers and students agreed in their ratings of different grading elements, indicating that perhaps teachers do a fairly good job of communicating to their students what evidence will be considered in determining their grades. Parents rating indicate, however, that they are less well informed. This is most obvious in the disparity of parents' ratings of elements such as major exams and compositions, class attendance, punctuality of assignments, class behavior, and progress made. In all cases, parents tended to rate these elements as more important than did teachers or students.

Performance Element	Teachers	Parents	Students
Major examinations	1.9	1.3	1.6
Major compositions	1.9	1.4	1.7
Unit tests	1.4	1.4	1.5
Class quizzes	1.7	1.9	1.9
Reports or projects	1.6	1.3	1.5
Student portfolios	2.5	1.9	2.0
Exhibits of students' work	2.2	1.9	2.2
Laboratory projects	2.5	1.9	2.0
Students' notebooks or journals	1.8	2.0	2.4
Classroom observations	1.8	1.7	2.2
Oral presentations	1.8	1.7	1.7
Homework completion	1.3	1.6	1.4
Homework quality	1.3	1.7	1.8
Class participation	1.8	1.5	1.7
Work habits and neatness	1.9	1.7	2.1
Effort put forth	1.4	1.1	1.5
Class attendance	2.5	1.5	2.0
Punctuality of assignments	2.1	1.5	2.0
Class behavior or attitude	2.6	1.2	2.1
Progress made	1.9	1.2	1.7

Table 4: Correlation Coefficients Between Grade Level and Teachers', Parents', and Students' Rankings of the Importance of Various Purposes of Grading.

Correlational analyses again proved informative, showing numerous significant relationships between grade level and teachers, parents, and students ratings of these grading elements. Among teachers, grade level was significantly correlated with ratings of exams, compositions, quizzes, reports, portfolios, exhibits, labs, attendance, and punctuality. In all cases, teachers at higher grade levels rated these elements as more important. Parents of children in lower grades, on the other hand, rated reports, portfolios, notebooks, classroom observations, neatness, and effort as more important. Students showed mixed results, with increases in grade level related to increased importance attached to exam, compositions, quizzes, reports, oral presentations, homework, punctuality, and behavior, and decreased importance attached to portfolios, notebooks, and neatness.

A final portion of the analysis considered the relationship between students' responses and those of their teachers and parents. This was done in an effort to determine whether students' perceptions of these grading issues were related more strongly to those of their parents or to those of their teachers. None of these relationships, however, proved statistically significant. Hence, it remains to be determined what factors have the strongest influence on students' perceptions of these important grading and reporting issues.

Implications and Conclusions

As educators move ahead in their efforts to improve grading and reporting processes, the perceptions of these various stakeholders will be critically important. While basically exploratory in nature, this study offers important evidence on the perceptions of teachers, parents, and students toward several vital grading and reporting issues. It is believed this evidence can help guide those efforts and serve as a foundation for other researchers interested in this important area of inquiry.

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